DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 288 213 CS 505 738

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TITLE What Would a Practical Theory of Language and Communication Be Like?
PUB DATE 6 Nov 87
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (73rd, Boston, MA, November 5-8, 1987).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Language Standardization; *Language Usage; *Linguistics; Pragmatics; *Speech Communication; *Standards; Standard Spoken Usage; Theories
IDENTIFIERS Language Reform

ABSTRACT

In order to view the field of communication as a practical discipline, this paper examines the debate between linguistic prescriptivism (the belief that standards of correct language exist and can be warranted), and scientific linguistics (which rejects the idea of standards in the name of scientific objectivity). Following an introduction to the idea of a practical discipline and an overview of the controversy concerning linguistic prescriptivism, the paper argues that although prescriptivist attitudes are generally unsound, the practical usefulness of linguistic standardization has been facilitated by prescriptivism. The paper also acknowledges the prescriptivist premise that linguistic choices are matters of taste subject to reflection and critical judgment. The paper concludes both that linguistic science has failed to acknowledge aspects of language about which deliberation is possible and necessary, and that traditional prescriptivism has advocated choices that are not responsive to the full range of relevant considerations. Using D. G. McKay's linguistic research to evaluate the ramifications of replacing "he" with a singular generic pronoun "they," the paper illustrates that deliberation about linguistic rules is possible and can be informed systematically by linguistic research, yielding a modified prescriptivism that rejects the dogmatism, social intolerance and intellectual slackness of traditional prescriptivism, while retaining the essential idea that questions about how humans ought to speak are worthy of serious consideration. (JG)

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(Presented at the Annual Convention of the Speech Communication Association, Boston MA, November 6, 1987.)

ED288213

WHAT WOULD A PRACTICAL THEORY OF LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION BE LIKE?

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For several years I have been exploring what it might mean to say that communication is a practical discipline (Craig, 1981, 1983, 1984a, 1984b, in press). As I will explain momentarily, this project entails a broad reconsideration of theory and methodology throughout the field. Among the many problems that it raises is one that appears with particular starkness in debates about scientific linguistics as opposed to other, more traditional approaches to language--I refer especially to the arguments surrounding linguistic prescriptivism. Although the arguments about prescription that have occurred in the communication field are in some respects rather different from those in linguistics, the linguistic debate has, I believe, influenced attitudes toward prescription in communication in more or less subtle ways, if only by helping to sustain a general impression that scientific and prescriptive approaches are necessarily incompatible. Because a practical discipline is basically oriented to the question of how a practice ought to be conducted, such a discipline must in some sense be involved with prescription; and indeed, despite the fact that nearly everybody seems to be against prescription on principle, the communication field is very much involved in prescribing about communication in all sorts of ways. The problem is whether this is merely a lapse on the part of what is otherwise a potentially respectable discipline, whether our prescriptive inclinations are entirely incompatible with a scientific approach to the subject, or whether, on the contrary, prescription is a legitimate goal of our scholarly and scientific efforts. In this working paper I cannot offer a systematic response to this problem, but I will, following an introduction to the idea of practical discipline and an overview of the controversy concerning linguistic prescriptivism, explore some issues of that debate while keeping the idea of practical discipline and the general problem of prescription in view. What we will find is that important aspects of language are suitable for the kind of rigorous deliberation about choices that characterizes practical discipline.

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As I understand it, the basic purpose of a practical discipline is to cultivate practice through critical study and reflection. In communication we are typically interested in practices such as rhetoric and mass communication in the public realm; practices involved in leading and participating, solving problems and conflicts, making decisions, and carrying on work in organizations and groups; and practices of social interaction and of forming, maintaining, and dissolving personal relationships. When a practice develops sufficient self-consciousness, critical reflectiveness, and formal elaboration, one can appropriately call it a practical art or discipline. The relationship of a practical discipline to that upon which it reflects cannot, then, be that of a detached observer to an object. A practical discipline necessarily is actively engaged with practices in the world. The purpose of such a discipline is to cultivate a more disciplined approach to practice, so that practice becomes not only more technically skillful and effective in the narrowly pragmatic sense, but also more deeply responsive to a variety of critical concerns ranging from the actual functions and effects of the practice to judgments of its historical or cultural significance and challanges to its ethical or epistemological warrantability.

This is not, of course, a new idea. It is essentially an updated version of a tradition of communication arts that found its first systematic expression in Aristotle's Rhetoric. What I envision is a contemporary discipline of communication whose position within a renewed tradition of practical philosophy would somewhat resemble that of the practical arts of rhetoric and politics within Aristotle's broader ethical system. Two or three decades ago the idea that the practical arts tradition could be updated and expanded to encompass the wider field of human communication gained some currency among speech communication scholars; but the idea was never very well developed and it ultimately fell victim to an increasingly polarized division between militantly humanistic rhetoricians and insurgent social scientists, both camps having denounced it as a weak compromise. The contemporary intellectual environment may be more hospitable to what I am calling practical discipline. Elsewhere (Craig, in press) I have shown some of the contributions that this idea can make to current debates about the methodology of social science and alternative approaches to inquiry such as hermeneutics and critical theory.

Communication as a practical discipline would not be altogether different from the communication discipline that actually exists at the present time. The field of communication has been poorly understood, not least of all by its own practitioners. On the whole, communication as I see it more closely resembles a practical discipline than it does any of the other models that people inside or outside the field have thought or wished it to resemble. What the adoption of a practical

discipline model would require is that we reflect more critically on the the whole range of methods and theories in the field from this point of view, asking how they might better serve the fundamental purpose of a practical discipline, to cultivate practice. In previous studies I have taken this approach to issues in communication theory (Craig, 1983, 1984b) and empirical research methods (Craig, 1984a). The present paper extends this work by taking up the problem of prescription, beginning with a look at the controversy surrounding linguistic prescriptivism.

Linguistic prescriptivism is roughly the belief that standards of "correct" or "good" language exist and can be warranted. According to the prescriptivists, language is always in danger of degenerating unless standards of correctness and taste are maintained, and modern linguistic science, by rejecting the very idea of standards in the name of scientific objectivity, has actively contributed to a serious decline of language standards in our society. Writings of Wilson Follett (1966) and John Simon (1980) are good examples of recent prescriptivist thought.

Scientific linguists not surprisingly tend to see these matters in a different light: Science not infrequently has found itself at odds with views of the world imposed by traditional authorities or cooked up by philosophical speculators, and linguistic science is no exception. To scientific linguists, prescriptivism is merely another brand of prescientific traditionalism and authoritarianism that can have no standing in a scientific discipline. Scientific linguists, therefore, to the extent that they have given any thought at all to linguistic prescriptivism, have opposed it and in fact have built a very strong case against it. A resurgence of prescriptivism since the 1970s has stimulated several excellent studies of the history and current status of the controversy (Barron, 1982; Chafe, 1984; Daniels, 1983; Davies, 1984; Drake, 1977; Finnegan, 1980; Milroy & Milroy, 1985). Making use of those studies along with prescriptivist writings such as those cited earlier, I will briefly outline the cases for and against linguistic prescriptivism.

The case for prescriptivism typically rests on premises such as these:

1) Linguistic standardization is necessary for efficient communication and for cultural and social cohesion.

2) Uncontrolled linguistic change threatens to weaken our cultural ties to the past by making ever more of the literary tradition inaccessible to the modern reader.

3) Linguistic choices are matters of taste that are as much subject to reflection and critical judgement as any other

culturally relevant human activity.

4) Deviations from standard usage and good taste in language reflect ignorance and/or carelessness that can be overcome through education and vigilance.

5) A general decline of literacy seems to characterize the present era as indicated by everything from SAT scores to numerous linguistic lapses on the part of ostensibly well-educated writers and public figures.

6) The relativistic attitudes promoted by scientific linguistics have inhibited educational and other institutions from doing anything about these problems.

The case against prescriptivism runs more or less as follows:

1) The prescriptivists are themselves linguistically ignorant. Lacking deep knowledge of the history and overall structure of the language, the prescriptivists concentrate their fire on isolated language "errors" such as h-dropping and split infinitives, the historical and lingusitic basis of which is often questionable at best.

2) Prescriptivists fail to understand the difference between language as a system and language use. Although specific, situated uses of language can perhaps be criticized on various grounds, linguists since de Saussure (1986 [1916]) have argued that the linguistic code as such is inherently arbitrary, that no language or dialect is intrinsically better than any other. Not only is there no basis for arguing about language, there is little practical point in doing so because linguistic change is a natural process and language as a social institution is too pervasive and too massive to be influenced decisively by anyone's conscious efforts either to preserve or to reform it.

3) Prescriptivists fail to appreciate important differences between written and spoken language. As compared to spoken language, standardization of the written language is not only more important from a practical standpoint, it is considerably easier to achieve through education, editorial policies, and other channels of enforcement. In the spoken language, despite social stigmatization, formal education, and the alleged homogenizing influences of mass culture, nonstandard dialects persist because they continue to serve the linguistic needs of their speakers. Competent speakers are capable of using a range of linguistic variations for different social purposes; to disapprove those variations because they fail to adhere to a single standard of correctness (a standard often based on norms of written language) rather misses the point of spoken language.

4) Prescriptive attitudes express and reinforce class and ethnically-based social prejudice and discrimination against speakers of nonstandard dialects. Since the linguistic standard is in principle an arbitrary choice, and since that standard predictably is based on the practice of more privileged social strata, a consequence of prescriptivist attitudes is that the linguistic competence of less privileged social elements is underestimated and devalued. Prescriptivism is thus an ideology in one of the classic pejorative senses of the term: a belief system that rationalizes social privilege on the basis of a distorted image of social reality.

Although I might be accused of favoring the scientists by giving them more space, I do think they have the upper hand in this debate. One hardly wants to endorse linguistic ignorance and social prejudice. And yet something remains of the prescriptivist position that the strong anti-prescriptivist arguments do not quite address.

Of the premises favoring prescriptivism listed earlier, we can reject #2 (the ill effects of language change) on the basis that linguistic change is generally too powerful to control, and #4 (deviations from standard usage reflect ignorance) because this sort of blanket judgment too easily rationalizes social prejudice and intolerance. #5 (the decline of literacy in our era) has a certain cranky quality that rightly arouses suspicion, although there is no reason in principle why it could not be true: The general level of literacy presumably is capable of increasing or decreasing, and we should more likely prefer to see it increase. But let us put that one aside anyway, on grounds of inadequate evidence. #6 (the promotion of harmful relativism by linguistic science) begs the main question and so should be held in abeyance until the harmfulness of relativism is proved. Having thus dismissed four of the six prescriptivist premises, we are still left with two premises that might warrant some mitigated version of prescriptivism. Those two premises will now be considered in greater detail.

Premise #1 asserts the practical importance of linguistic standardization. As two examples (Milroy & Milroy, 1985; and Davies, 1984) will show, sociolinguists have acknowledged the legitimacy of this concern, albeit with the proviso that spoken and written language must be treated differently.

The Milroys (1985) suggest that linguists, instead of merely dismissing prescriptivism as an error, should study prescription as a sociolinguistic practice, to see what functions the practice may have served that would account for its emergence and persistence. In the case of English, prescriptive attitudes came into prominence in the sixteenth century in association with efforts to standardize English, especially the written language. Since standardization was and is necessitated by various social,

political, and commercial requirements of modernization, it seems that prescriptive practices have performed a useful social function insofar as they have facilitated the adoption of a linguistic standard by giving that standard an apparently authoritative basis. The problem, as discussed earlier, is that that authoritative basis has too often been socially ideological and linguistically ill-informed.

But if prescriptivism is rejected there remains the more basic problem that has sustained prescriptivism as a practice: If it is necessary to adopt a standard language then it is necessary to decide what that standard will be, and that decision has to be warranted in some way. The principle that the linguistic system is arbitrary is of no help whatever in solving this problem, for as linguists also point out, the choice of a standard is anything but neutral in regard to social privilege. And educational institutions, for example, cannot avoid making those choices. Davies (1984) characterizes the choice of a linguistic standard as ultimately "political" and "educational" (by which he means that it cannot be made on linguistic grounds alone), but he nevertheless shows how linguistic knowledge can inform the choice of a standard. Languages and dialects, he points out, are not equal "in terms of sociolinguistic suitability--that is, choosing a language for a particular function, use, or set of uses....Of course, they can develop, but at any point in time they are not equally developed" (229). On this principle, the standard language is that linguistic variety that is appropriate to the widest range of social contexts. That such a standard can more straightforwardly be determined for written than for spoken language is also based on linguistic evidence, and so is the fact that nonstandard spoken varieties are likely to persist despite the most strenuous efforts of outside authorities to eradicate them. These linguistic facts help to warrant an educational policy emphasizing standard written language and at least understanding of standard spoken language, encouraging the addition of standard spoken language features to nonstandard speakers' linguistic repertories, but accepting the use of nonstandard spoken language in appropriate contexts. What emerges, then, from this line of thinking is a qualified form of prescriptivism that is more responsive than traditional prescriptivism was to the claims of linguistic science (and incidentally to the claims of non-elite social groups) but, at the same time, more responsive than linguistic science has often been to the practical context in which the choice of a language standard must occur.

In regard to premise #1 of the prescriptivist case, we should, then, acknowledge the necessity of language standardization while emphasizing that the issue is more complicated than prescriptivists have typically considered to to be and, above all, that the langauge standard is not simply given by tradition but has to be deliberated about.

This brings us to premise #3, the second of the two prescriptivist premises that the anti-prescriptivist case failed to address, which holds that linguistic choices are matters of taste that are subject to reflection and critical judgment. In other words, linguistic choices, like other matters of taste, can be argued about even if they cannot be warranted in any absolute sense. The principle that the linguistic code is arbitrary would seem to deny that langauge can be argued about at all. But that conclusion is wrong in at least two respects: first, because particular instances of language use may not be arbitrary even if the linguistic code itself is; and second because, even though the linguistic code as a whole may be arbitrary in principle, the choice among alternative elements or rules that might be incorporated into the code may be consequential. I will expand a little on each of these points.

First, language use can be argued about even if the langauge system cannot. Prescriptivists have often failed to understand this distinction. Nevertheless it is true that some prescriptivist arguments have to do with the language system (for example, the proscription against splitting infinitives), while others have to do with language use (for example, the proscription against the misuse of technical jargon to create an aura of expertise). Milroy and Milroy (1985) support this conclusion; their study of prescriptive practices identified two distinct threads within what they call the linguistic "complaint tradition":

> Type 1 complaints, which are implicitly legalistic and which are concerned with correctness, attack 'misuse' of specific parts of the phonology, grammar, vocabulary of English (and in the case of written English 'errors' of spelling, punctuation, etc.). Type 2 complaints, which we may call 'moralistic', recommend clarity in writing and attack what appear to be abuses of language that may mislead and confuse the public. (37)

Type 1 complaints, but not type 2 complaints, make the mistake (according to the principle that language is arbitrary) of assuming that linguistic rules as such can be ranked as superior or inferior.

But are linguistic rules themselves not arguable? It would seem that they are, for the choice of rules within the context of an already existing language can be consequential and therefore arguable. Perhaps the most apt illustration of this point can be found in recent disputes about sexist language. Some complaints about sexism concern language use only (for example, the complaint that newspaper stories about married women typically mention the husband's occupation when a similar story about a man

would not mention his wife's occupation). However some complaints about sexism concern the linguistic code itself, and these complaints appear to warrant serious deliberation. Take, for example, the vexing issue of generic "he". Feminists have objected strongly (and for some very good reasons) against the standard prescription that one should use "he" when referring to an singular person who might be of either gender. It should be obvious, however, that the argument here is not over whether to prescribe a rule but rather what rule to prescribe. All sides of this debate are prescriptivist; and several different rules have been proposed, typically on the basis of very little linguistic research. Mackay (1980) conducted linguistic studies in order to evaluate one of those proposals, which is that "he" be replaced by the use of "they" as a singular, generic pronoun. MacKay's findings suggest that this rule would have some distinct advantages (neutral connotation, naturalness, simplicity, and lexical availability), but that it would also have serious disadvantages (several kinds of ambiguity, conceptual inaccuracy, distancing and dehumanizing connotations, etc.). Among the possible disadvantages are some that involve potentially long-lasting side effects on other elements of the language system per se, for example a more general weakening of the number agreement rule. Whatever the merit of MacKay's specific recommendations (he recommends against singular "they" as a general solution to the problem), his work suggests and in fact he quite explicitly proposes that deliberation about linguistic rules is not only possible but can be informed systematically by linguistic research. Again, what emerges from this discussion is a modified prescriptivism, one that rejects the dogmatism, social intolerance, and intellectual slackness of traditional prescriptivism while retaining the essential idea that questions about how we ought to speak are worthy of serious consideration.

In conclusion, contrary to apparent implications of the principle that the linguistic code is arbitrary, language is, in many respects, a matter about which human beings can legitimately and usefully deliberate and make choices. At the same time linguistic science, a rational-empirical inquiry into language as an abstract, arbitrary code, has much to say that can inform those deliberations. A practical discipline of language would require both principles. A practical discipline concerns itself with matters about which choices can and therefore must be made, to the end that those choices will be made as rationally as possible in the light of all relevant considerations. Both linguistic science, to the extent that it has failed to acknowledge those aspects of language about which deliberation is possible and necessary, and traditional prescriptivism, to the extent that it has advocated the choice of linguistic practices that were not responsive to the full range of relevant considerations--both have failed to see the possibility of a practical discipline.

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